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AUTHOR Cuthbert, Bali
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ABSTRACT

School counselors agree that for school counseling programs to be successful, parent participation is essential. Involving parents in designing a school counseling program increases the chances that the counseling objectives will be reinforced at home. One effective strategy used by the Dorchester School District in South Carolina is conducting a yearly needs assessment to determine the main concerns for the year. Parents, teachers, and students are surveyed to assess what changes and goals need to be made in the program and what new initiatives need to be introduced. Involving parents in program activities and keeping open communication with parents is also important. The article addresses these issues along with others. It offers suggestions for working with parents who disagree with a program's goals and presents ideas on how to compensate for other problems encountered. (JDM)

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by

Bali Cuthbert

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Chapter Seven

Involving and Responding to Parents: *Opportunities and Challenges*

Bali Cuthbert
Dorchester School District Two, Summerville, South Carolina

Ten years ago, school counselors in Dorchester School District Two wrote a district comprehensive guidance program designed to address proactively the needs of students, parents, and school staff. After carefully studying the comprehensive guidance program model and determining that its components and organizational structure best represented their needs and the goals they wanted to pursue, counselors decided to pattern the district program after it. School counselors worked diligently to establish themselves as leaders of a counseling program, rather than as individuals holding a position. As with most educational reforms, changing the behaviors and perceptions of individuals was not easy. The paradigm shift from a counseling position to a counseling program was embraced by many of the counselors, feared by some, and ignored by others. In 1999, South Carolina adopted a statewide comprehensive guidance program, also based on the comprehensive guidance program model. Because the Dorchester School District comprehensive model was very similar to the new state model, counselors were able to devote their time to refining and aligning their program to state and national guidance standards, rather than having to develop a new district model to meet the state mandate.

Standards-Based Education

Education in our nation continues to be scrutinized, and public demand for accountability is driving educational reform. Never before has education been in such a state of flux as it is today. New programs and initiatives are introduced daily and acclaimed as the panacea for the problems educators face. Most of these new programs are not given

enough time to work; in many cases, they are removed after only one or two years, before being fully implemented. Teachers, counselors, administrators, school boards, and parents must work collaboratively to implement sound educational practices and strategies. Only then will public education survive the close scrutiny, high stakes testing, and standards-based initiatives being implemented nationwide.

The national focus on standards-based education produces challenges for school counselors and their efforts to support the social and emotional development of children. High stakes testing has created a different environment in schools, one that is not necessarily nurturing or supportive of affective education. School counselors must meet national and state counseling standards. However, because these standards and competencies are not found on any state or national tests used to measure student achievement, many educators view these standards as peripheral or nonessential. In essence, these standards are addressed if there is time to manipulate the school day to find time to teach them. School counselors find themselves bargaining for time with teachers and administrators in order to provide classroom guidance, small-group counseling, and individual counseling.

One positive effect that the standards-based education movement is bringing is the involvement of parents in the educational plans of their children. Parents are being encouraged to participate in school-based task forces, parent conferences, and planning sessions related to their child's academic performance. A shared vision and strong working relationship between parents and school personnel will result in better services being provided for students. School counselors must make a concerted effort to be included in opportunities to educate parents about the counseling program and counseling services they provide. Parents must be made aware of the fact that the emotional health of their child is directly related to that child's academic achievement and success in school. When parents understand the important relationship between emotional health and academic success, and become knowledgeable about the school counseling program, they will join with counselors in demanding that schools give the appropriate time to affective education.

Parent Participation in Program Design

School counselors agree that parent involvement is essential for counseling programs to be successful. Research shows that parents are the most influential people in the life of a child. Peer pressure, which parents often believe has more influence on their child's behavior, has been shown to rank behind a parent's influence. Parents know their child's needs, and it is important for them to be able to share this information

with school counselors. Many times, parents can provide information about their and their child's previous involvement in programs in other educational systems.

Involving parents in designing a school counseling program promotes insight into parents' expectations regarding their child's well-being. Parent involvement also increases the chance that skills taught in the guidance curriculum will be reinforced at home. Successful social skills education is dependent upon the school counselor and the parent working together. Permanent, systemic change cannot occur without this collaborative effort. Parents who are involved in designing a school counseling program become knowledgeable about the goals of the program. This knowledge promotes a sense of ownership in the program and increases the likelihood that parents will support the goals established. Parent involvement enhances the opportunity for open dialogue between parents and counselors; respect for the counselors and trust in the counseling program often follow. The ultimate goal of parent involvement in a school counseling program is to empower parents to be an integral part of their child's education.

Although parent involvement is essential for promoting support for and understanding about school counseling programs, it is not always easy to involve parents. Counselors must strive to find creative and effective strategies to encourage parent participation. One effective strategy used by Dorchester School District counselors is the practice of conducting an annual needs assessment to determine the needs of the students in their schools. Surveys are distributed to students, parents, faculty, and staff at the beginning of each school year. The needs assessment provides information about the expectations of the respondents and is used for making changes to the current program and designing new initiatives to meet the needs of both students and parents. Depending on the information received, changes might involve providing more individual counseling and fewer small-group counseling sessions, or providing more classroom guidance and less individual counseling. Our counselors are cognizant that the counseling programs of yesterday do not necessarily meet the needs of today's students.

Parent Participation in Guidance Program Activities

Effective communication is another essential strategy that counselors regularly use to keep parents informed and involved. The key to effective communication is to remember to communicate often and in a manner easily understood by parents. Parent-teacher conferences provide unparalleled opportunities for counselors to gain perspective about a child's home environment. [Nesselhuf (1998).] Involving the child in a

parent-teacher conference can be an effective communication strategy, but the age and emotional well-being of the child must always be considered. This strategy may not be appropriate for children in elementary schools. Open communication is enhanced when parents are afforded easy access to school counselors. Having an open door policy encourages parents to seek information during times that fit their schedules. A friendly atmosphere conveys a "nothing to hide" message and promotes trust.

Time and schedules are issues for parents and school counselors alike. There are two strategies that school counselors can use to address the range of parent work schedules. The first is to adapt time-intensive programs or workshops to more parent-friendly time frames. For example, a workshop that normally is conducted in one-hour sessions for eight weeks can be scheduled for four weeks if parents agree to participate for two-hour blocks. Counselors report a better attendance and participation rate for programs that take fewer weeks. The second strategy that addresses time issues is to vary the times when programs are offered. Parent nights meet the needs of most parents, but parents who work a swing shift are better served by morning programs. Parents appreciate the effort school counselors make to accommodate their work schedules. Making these small changes in scheduling programs and parent conferences demonstrates a respect for the life situations of parents.

Negativism and rumors often work to sabotage a new program. Parents who are knowledgeable about the school counseling program and the initiatives of the counseling department often may serve as ambassadors for school counselors. To promote understanding, parents may be invited to serve on advisory committees, such as health, drug, and violence prevention; school-to-work; and grade-to-grade transition committees. As parents become more familiar with the goals of the program, they can provide valuable information about formats and content that would best meet their needs. The more often parents are in the school, the more willing they are to share their positive comments as well as their concerns.

Parents may also be asked to help with specific tasks at various times during the year. For example, parents can serve as test monitors, staff registration tables, and perform other tasks on an as-needed basis. Counselors are encouraged to use parent volunteers as often as possible for tasks that do not require master's-level training or involve confidentiality issues. Thoughtful planning can ensure many important volunteer opportunities that do not violate confidentiality concerns.

Career fairs and career programs provide excellent opportunities for parents to be involved in school counseling activities. Career programs are

usually one-time activities that fit in nicely with a parent's work schedule. Most parents are excited about spending a few hours talking about their chosen career, and most children enjoy having their parents visit their classrooms. One particularly successful career workshop at a local high school involved parents and alumni from the high school who conducted 30-minute workshops about their occupations. The students enjoyed hearing from former students who had sat in the same classrooms they were now occupying. The success of this program was evident from the positive comments made by the community and the students.

Parents appreciate having opportunities to experience the same educational opportunities their children experience. School counselors can provide opportunities for parents to use the same career computer software their children use. For example, parents can be invited to work on computers in computer labs to research new job opportunities, complete career assessments, and research job outlooks. Students can serve as facilitators for these workshops and can be paired with their parents.

Character education lessons and social skills training provide excellent opportunities for parents to be involved in the school counseling program. Parents can receive training from the counselor in small groups and then be assigned to classrooms to teach the lessons to the students. Parent volunteers often facilitate special clubs, such as the Just Say No Club or the Character Education Club. In our district, we have "Just Say No Moms" and "Do Dads" to help with other special projects. Parents enjoy the opportunity to work on altruistic projects and to interact in positive ways with the students.

Parent involvement is more easily attained for programs that focus on academic information. Grade-transition meetings involving fifth-grade students and their parents and eighth-grade students and their parents typically have wonderful attendance. At these meetings, parents receive information about their child's new school, take tours of the new school facility, meet key personnel, and learn about the curriculum their child will pursue. Other information, such as explanations about statewide testing programs, helpful test-taking tips, extracurricular activities, and website information, is distributed in parent packets. At the high school level, college planning nights and evening meetings pertaining to student course registration for the following year usually have good parent involvement. At these meetings, school counselors provide information about the high school experience and emphasize requirements necessary for moving on to postsecondary education opportunities. All students are encouraged to attend the college planning meeting every year, as each meeting brings new information, challenges, and requirements.

School counselors must be diligent in providing positive experiences for parents who are involved in a school counseling program. Determining the level of commitment from parents before a project is started is essential, as is adequate training for parents involved in teaching lessons. Some parents prefer to work behind the scenes rather than in the limelight. Many parents who cannot be involved during regular school hours are willing to make phone calls, cut out pictures, or provide items they can purchase and send to school. Some parents prefer to work as partners with other parents and are willing to team-teach lessons. In all situations, teachers need to remain in their classrooms when parents are providing instruction to serve as disciplinarians and resources for the parents when necessary.

Despite the best efforts of a school counselor, there are times when strategies and programs designed to involve parents fail to produce the desired outcomes. Reasons for the failure of these strategies might include (a) unrealistic time commitment expectations, (b) trying to communicate too much information to too many parents at one time, or (c) insufficient attention given to organization. Several years ago, one high school initiated a career portfolio–signing evening for parents. Parents were encouraged to sign up for appointments to view their child's career portfolio and talk with counselors about their child's course requests for the next year. Most parents did not take advantage of this opportunity, however, which resulted in school personnel spending the evening working on other projects.

Lessons can be learned from failed attempts to involve parents as well as successful ones. It is always important to have an alternate plan when parent volunteers are involved. Occasionally, too many volunteers arrive and counselors need to have something else planned for them to do. It is never a good idea to send a volunteer home because there is nothing to do, as it will be difficult to recruit the person to come again. On the other hand, sometimes volunteers fail to show up, and a plan needs to be in place for that contingency as well.

Teachers can be a school counselor's most important ally when programs are being implemented. For that reason, it is important to ask for the teacher's input, to fully explain the goals of the program, and to let the teacher know the role he or she needs to play to make the program a success. When parents are going to be working in a teacher's classroom, counselors need to make sure the teacher meets the parent. One important thing to remember is that if the teacher is not happy, no one is happy.

Responding to Parents Who Oppose the Program

The very nature of affective education presents the possibility that some individuals or groups will oppose programs that are initiated in the school. School counselors will be called upon to use all of their counseling skills and techniques to handle these critical constituents. Using current needs assessment results is one way to address the concerns of critical constituents. It is difficult to argue with offering programs that parents, students, and faculty members have identified as important through a valid needs assessment. Likewise, programs that have documented positive evaluations are more easily defended than those without any evaluation to substantiate their effectiveness.

Parents who disagree with a particular program should be encouraged to review the curriculum and resources that are available. The school counselor should listen with respect to the parent's concerns. Every effort should be made to address concerns about cultural diversity. Sharing facts about the program in question, explaining the goals and objectives of the program, maintaining professionalism, and refraining from becoming defensive are techniques that may cause parents to change their minds about a program or initiative. Disagreements about curricular offerings should be viewed as a vehicle for improving the counseling program and an opportunity for counselors to review and re-evaluate initiatives. If a compromise is possible without jeopardizing the integrity of a program, the counselor might consider making the accommodations sought by the parent. Parents should be invited to write a letter expressing their concerns about a guidance program, and if a compromise cannot be reached, the parent should be allowed to remove his or her child from the program.

Benefits Outweigh Problems

The benefits of involving parents and community members in the school counseling program outweigh the problems that sometimes occur. Counselors need to trust the process of involving parents. Involving parents takes a great deal of time and effort, but the benefits are long-lasting and sometimes permanent. Here is specific advice for counselors who are working to improve parent involvement:

1. When you ask for parents' input and ideas, use them.
2. Get to know who the regular school volunteers are and solicit their help in the guidance program.
3. Be organized and ready when volunteers arrive because chaos is easily

recognized and impossible to hide.

4. Hours spent training parent volunteers can greatly reduce the number and magnitude of problems that might occur down the line.
5. Always follow up with a personal thank-you note when parents have given their time to help with a project.

The most important thing to remember is that what is best for students is what should be done, not what is best for personnel. Students' needs always take priority. School counselors who empower parents to be involved in their child's education are ultimately empowering the children they serve. Empowered children are emotionally and socially healthy. They make wise decisions, act responsibly, and become productive citizens. That is the ultimate goal of all school counseling programs.

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About the Author

Beverly "Bali" Cuthbert has been a guidance specialist in Dorchester School District Two, Summerville, South Carolina, for three years. Previously, she was a guidance program specialist in the same district. In addition, she has worked as a high school counselor and social studies teacher, and as an intermediate and junior high school teacher. She is active in the South Carolina School Counselors Association and is a leader in her community as well, having served on the Dorchester County Alcohol and Drug Commission for ten years and as chairwoman of the board of directors for STARS (Summerville Takes a Responsible Stand) for 11 years. She can be reached at bcuthbert@dorchester2.k12.sc.us.